

# Country of the Week: Gabon

Gabon, one of sub-Saharan Africa's most prosperous and politically stable nations, is a low-lying tropical country situated along the equator on Central Africa's west coast. The country's name is said to originate from early Portuguese explorers, who used the word "gabao," meaning "cloak," to describe the shape of the Komo River estuary.


Since the 1970s, when oil was first discovered offshore, Gabon's oil industry and foreign investment have contributed to its substantial economic growth, and the country enjoys a per capita income four times that of most sub-Saharan African nations. Gabon's abundant oil and mineral reserves, paired with an extremely low population density, have allowed Gabon to maintain its rich biodiversity and tropical rainforests, which cover an amazing 84 percent of the country.

In 2002, the government set aside 10% of the country's land to form 13 national parks. Gabon also recently announced the creation of Africa's largest network of marine protected areas—some 20,500 square miles of territorial seas that are home to an array of threatened marine life, including the largest breeding populations of leatherback sea turtles and 20 species of dolphins and whales.

These natural wonders are second only to Gabon's inspiring people. Thanks to you and other inspiring members of the [Young African Leaders Initiative \(YALI\) Network](#) working to create positive change, Gabon is the YALI Network #CountryoftheWeek! Keep reading to discover three featured members striving to empower women and girls through education and mentorship, stop violence against women, and become leaders in their community.

## **Empowering women and girls through education and mentorship**

When YALI Network member Sandrine Mengue M'Efoue was first studying to be a social worker in South Africa, she worked with many children from "challenging circumstances." That experience, she says, had a major impact on her and her work.

Sandrine Mengue M'Efoue from #CountryoftheWeek Gabon  uses games and activities to engage foster children at Centre d'Accueil d'Akanda on Mandela Day.

After returning to Gabon as a full-fledged social worker, Sandrine became a project coordinator at an NGO called Association Pour la Maternité Responsable, which works to promote women's self-esteem, confidence, and self-determination. In particular, the association focuses on helping women who have had unwanted pregnancies at a young age.

"We work to help those from disadvantaged backgrounds develop entrepreneurship skills and become financially independent through a mentoring program," explains Sandrine. "I enjoy the mentoring process because it's a way to share what I've learned and to give back to other young women," she says.

In her free time, Sandrine volunteers at two orphanages and various foster care organizations, where she does activities with children and finds ways to raise money while encouraging others to


get involved. She is also developing an agricultural project with friends designed to motivate women to escape poverty through farming. On Mandela Day, for #YALIServes, she organised an afternoon of games and gave away books and toys at the foster home Centre d'accueil d'Akanda along with other YALI Network members.

But Sandrine doesn't believe her work in the community is philanthropic. Or optional. "It's a necessity," she says. "My mother raised me with the...responsibility to help whenever I can. I strongly believe that there is no other way to build a better world."

Sandrine has earned two [YALI Network Online Courses](#) certificates, including [Understanding the Rights of Women and Girls](#), which helps inform her work at another foster home, Centre d'Accueil d'Engodjé. She has also hosted a #YALILearns event in her community, and believes that teaching young girls to be strong is vital to helping them build a better future.

Do you want to get involved in your community? Like the [YALI Network Facebook page](#) and access free online trainings, virtual events, and more by visiting the [YALI Network website](#).

## Stopping violence against women

Students attend a program called   
"Empower Girls," hosted by YALI  
Network member Gina Nzengue.

Our next featured member, Gina Nzengue, is an advertising professional in Libreville and an alumna of the International Visitor Leadership Program.

In 2014, Gina co-founded the nonprofit [FEMACT](#), an organization dedicated to reducing violence against girls at school and teaching them about their rights. "In Gabon, violence against women and girls is a real issue," Gina explains. "My non-profit has begun a campaign called FORCE, or Femact Oeuvre pour le Renforcement des Capacités des Enfants, which teaches young girls their rights and shows them all the resources available to help them."

Last November, Gina organized a community program called "Empower Girls," during which she taught a group of young men and women in her community about preventing harassment. In addition to organizing youth events, Gina's nonprofit creates FORCE clubs at schools throughout Libreville to train student ambassadors. So far, the program has trained 250 students. The FORCE campaign will also soon include a website and mobile app designed to counsel young girls about sexual health and pregnancy.

For Gina, the YALI Network has provided vital tools through which she can spread awareness about these important issues. "The [YALI Network Online Courses](#) help me a lot" she says. "Before hosting an event or giving a talk, I always look for tips or information on the topic that I'm speaking about." Gina has earned several YALI Network Online Course certificates, including for [Community Organizing for Action](#) and [Workforce Collaboration and Development](#), and has hosted four #YALILearns events.

Interested in joining the YALI Network or applying to the Mandela Washington Fellowship? [Follow this link](#) to hear some tips from Gina!

Vous envisagez de faire partie du YALI Network ou de postuler à la Mandela Washington Fellowship? Suivez [ce lien](#) pour écouter les conseils de Gina, Fellow 2016.

## Becoming a community leader

“The YALI Network and online courses helped me become someone different, and to use my influence and energy to create positive change,” says YALI Network member Gael Mouteli. Gael is a student at Omar Bongo University of Gabon, where he studies English. He recently became president of his department’s student association, and credits the YALI Network with first inspiring him to run for the position.

“I decided to become a candidate because events were disorganized, and I wanted to create positive change within my department,” says Gael. “YALI trainings and courses gave me the motivation and courage to follow my dreams...and I won the election!”

Gael believes that through his leadership of the “New Generation” student association, students in his department will no longer be divided by “conflicts between new students...and former,” but will instead be unified by their shared interests and common goals.

Join Gael and members like him by [joining the YALI Network](#). You’ll receive email updates, opportunities to collaborate with other young leaders, and access to helpful products and programs such as [YALI Network Online Courses](#) and [#YALILearns events](#)!

Gael Mouteli participates as a judge in a competition for young women entrepreneurs.



---